Soon after I got to New York in 1936, I became an organizer for the CIO, the activity which I have already related.

Q: You have mentioned that you also went out to southeast Missouri to do some organizing work there. What was the situation, and what took you out to Missouri?

McKinney: The party of which I was a member, the Workers Party, learned of the condition among sharecroppers, laborers and tenant farmers in the cotton growing regions of Southeast Missouri. After learning about this, I investigated the situation. About this time there was a great deal of unrest among these people in Southeast Missouri, and many of them, in the region around Poplar Bluff, had been evicted and were living out in the roads. They lived in the road and they carried on the usual life activities, such as cooking and eating, on the roadside.

Later these people, through the generosity of liberals in St. Louis, were moved to some high ground outside of Poplar Bluff where they lived in tents for a while, and then began to build houses for themselves.

My activity was carried on, following this, among the sharecroppers and tenant farmers of Southeast Missouri. The situation there -- first, I think I should mention that

there is a very large cotton growing section in Southeast Missouri, contiguous to Northern Arkansas, which makes several hundred thousand acres of cotton growing in Northern Arkansas and Southeast Missouri. The wages paid in 1941, when I first made contact with these workers, were 10¢ an hour for chopping cotton. "Chopping cotton" is an expression used among laborers there for chopping the weeds out of the cotton. The weeds have to be chopped up, or else they'll grow up and strangle the cotton and there'll be no cotton. So it is very necessary, particularly after it has rained, to have the weeds chopped out.

These people, whole families working, man wife and children, were paid 10¢ an hour for chopping cotton, and worked a ten hour day.

It is necessary to correct a mistake which I just made. These people were paid 7½¢ an hour, or 75¢ for a ten hour day.

They lived under a reign of terror. They were not permitted to hold meetings for organizing purposes. Henchmen and employers of the cotton growers would break up the meetings by physical force.

One incident down there needs to be repeated and emphasized. A Negro sharecropper was driving a tractor, and noticed that the tractor needed oil. He told the foreman that the tractor needed oil. The foreman remarked, "You go ahead and drive the tractor. Getting oil is my business."

The man did this, and a bearing burned out on the tractor. At the end of the week, or when pay day came, the man who owned this plantation, who was his own paymaster, gave this man his money, less $8, which had been taken out for a new bearing. The man remonstrated. An argument ensued, and probably some rough talk, and the planter pulled his gun, shot the man, dragged him around behind the barn, dug a hole and buried him himself.

I could repeat other incidents in connection with this terror under which these people, white and black, lived in this area. Conditions were worse for the Negroes than they were for the white workers.

I was speaking one night at a meeting held far out in the hinterland, down a dark road, and when I came out of the meeting, the motor to the Ford was running. I asked the man with me why the motor was running on the car and he replied, "Huh, to get you away from here if anything happens."

This was my first practical experience with this terror, so far as I was personally concerned.

One of the interesting things about these meetings which they held, particularly the meetings attended wholly by Negroes, was the fact that they were held as religious assemblies. They were prayer meetings, and singing meetings. What they were in fact, however, was labor organizing meetings of a primitive sort. They

really came together to discuss their economic condition, but for a multitude of reasons, they presented the aspect of religious meetings. This was due not only to the fact that most of these people were actually religious, but it was also due to the fact that the shrewder of them knew that this was a way to cover up the economic and organizational discussions which they were going to participate in.

I was very much impressed by the fact that nearly all of the utterances and most of the singing had to do with the Old Testament. Very little of it was concerned with the New Testament. It was clear that they were concerned primarily with carrying on a certain kind of struggle, a certain kind of activity, and they understood, in their rather elementary way, that in the Old Testament some fighting had taken place, and that liberation had come out of fighting. This was very clear and was unmistakable, in the method in which they conducted these meetings.

During the period when I was active down here, a lynching took place at Sykeston, Missouri. Sykeston is in this region, and is where the cotton gin is for this area. A Negro was fastened to the rear end of an automobile, about 11 o'clock Sunday morning, during church services, and was dragged through the street. I emphasize "during church services" because the sharecroppers, particularly the Negro sharecroppers of this area, seemed to lay

great emphasis on this aspect of the event. They remarked to me that they had lynched this man on the Lord's Day, while church was going on. The lynching really had economic roots, and grew out of disputes and differences of opinion about the ginning of cotton. Also it was beginning to be known that there was some unrest in the area, and that people were beginning to think about becoming organized.

It has to be emphasized that this took place in the United States of America in 1940, '41 and '42. It was necessary to hold meetings in secret, and be very careful who attended. We had one experience of defection, where one sharecropper became an informer, and this was a situation that could have been repeated over and over if we had not exercised great care in the procedure.

One interesting experience took place in this area. A part of the problem there was to unite and get together the black and white sharecroppers. The white sharecroppers, of course, had been indoctrinated with notions of racial superiority which they accepted and believed, despite the fact that they were no better off than the black sharecroppers and were paid the same wages.

I managed to get together a group of seven or eight white sharecroppers, and handled them rather roughly, in discussing

with them the facts of their economic and political life, explaining to them that they were really on the same level with the black sharecroppers, and that it was necessary for them to unite into one organization against their common exploiter and against their common enemy, the cotton planter.

It was also necessary to explain to these people -- and I think it is necessary to emphasize this at this point -- that most of the cotton planters in this area did not own the land that they worked. Probably the biggest cotton planter in this area had under his control something like 50,000 acres, and owned, I suspect, none of the land. Mortgages on all this land were held by the big insurance companies, Metropolitan particularly, and this, of course, increased the activities of the planters to squeeze the last drop out of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers and laborers.

To get back to the meeting with these white sharecroppers, after I'd talked for about an hour, with the gloves off and very frankly, saying to them that activities of their short sort and notions which they held were stupid and detrimental to their own interests, I stopped and waited for discussion on their part. One sharecropper -- (white, of course) -- got up and remarked something somewhat as follows:

"I've listened to what the brother has to say. Perhaps he knows what he's talking about." And then, jumping up,

he said, "But I don't like a nigger nohow!"

Then I had to explain to him that I knew all that before I came into the meeting, and I knew now that he had a very good voice and that there was nothing wrong with his voice, but I said to him, "I'm trying to get something into your head."

There was a great deal of hum and bustle in the meeting, which disturbed me, wondering whether or not I would remain personally safe in this area, but nothing happened. And when the meeting was over, we continued the discussion, and one of the white sharecroppers volunteered to drive me back to the Missouri section where I was to spend the night.

Q: Mr. McKinney, I wonder if you could tell a little bit more about the planters who were behind so much of this difficulty; about their attitude toward the workers, both white and Negro, and toward the fact that they were living out in the street and in tent groups and so forth.

McKinney: It isn't easy to say much about the planters because I really don't know much about theplanters, except general things which related to the sharecroppers and tenant farmers as a whole. One of the reasons for this is, it was necessary for those of us who were working down there to keep away from the planters as much

as possible, and not be seen by the planters.

An illustration of what can happen in an area of this kind is the following incident. I was returning from Southeast Missouri to St. Louis in a car with a white man. This man was driving the car. We were driving within the speed limit, and were violating no traffic regulations. We were stopped by a car of the Missouri State Police, with one policeman in the car, one state policeman. He stopped our car and came over and talked to us. He asked us where we were going, where we had been. We told him that we were representing some people in St. Louis who had been gathering clothes for sharecroppers, and we had delivered some clothes to the sharecroppers. I carrred in my pocket a letter signed by the president of the Pittsburgh Courier publishing company, saying that I was a representative of the Pittsburgh Courier and the Courier would appreciate any courtesies shown me. I showed the policeman this letter, and that seemed to work a charm on him. We were told to proceed. I do not know yet why he stopped us, but it is not difficult to guess that he stopped us because here were a Negro and a white man in the car together. This itself, at this time, in Southeast Missouri, was an suspicious event.

One other thing should be mentioned. We distributed Labor Action, which was the Workers Party paper, down there. We rolled the papers up, five in a bundle, put a rubber band

around it, and went into the homes of trusted sharecroppers, left the bundle for them, and they distributed the paper themselves to five of their friends or contacts.

Our real purpose was, not to make contact with the planters or their henchmen, but to keep away from them, not to have anything to say to them or anything to do with them.

Q: On this question of Negroes and white people being in one another's company, how did this work, among the sharecroppers and tenant farmers themselves?

McKinney: As a rule there was separation. The general mores of the area prevailed: separation of black and white. In Lilburne, Missouri, for instance, one Sunday afternoon I was walking with one of the Negro sharecropper leaders, down the main street, and some young white men were approaching. He stepped off of the sidewalk, got out in the street, to let them pass. I stayed on the sidewalk and let one of them move over so I could get by. After we had passed he said to me, "You see, you see the way they act? They wouldn't even give us room to pass on the sidwalk."

This illustrates what the general feeling, what the general attitude in the area, was. I've also mentioned the fact that in Sykeston, in this area, a lynching took place in 1941.

Q: I wonder, Mr. McKinney, if you could go into a little more detail about your speaking to and handling the white sharecroppers that you brought together, the ones that you say you "took your gloves off" on. Give us some further examples of just how you tried to bring them around to your way of thinking, and in favor of organization?

McKinney: An organization was formed in Southeast Missouri called the Missouri Agricultural Workers Union. I did not participate in the formation of this organization, but had contact with the president and with other members. The dominant influence in this organization was the Communist Party. There were white members, but the majority of the members were Negroes. There was no big success in bringing the white and black workers together into one organization. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that the CIO did not extend itself greatly in working among the agricultural population. This was due to several causes, one of which is perhaps that to organize agricultural workers, particularly at this time and in this area and under the conditions of 1940-41, meant a continual outlay of money with no prospect of any income from dues, because there was no money to pay dues with, and the CIO of course was busy with the industrial workers. And it has to be clear, or probably is clear, that the craft union AF of L

would not concern itself with these workers.

Q: I wonder, Mr. McKinney, if you could tell us a little bit more about justhow many farmers were involved in your organizing activities, and how significant were they to the local or regional economy there?

McKinney: It has to be remembered and understood that this was an organized procedure without really having a formal and conventional organization. I mentioned the Missouri Agricultural Workers Union, but most of our activity was not carried on through this organization, but through the leadership of a committee of nine or ten, and a branch of the Workers Party composed of twelve or fifteen people.

We conducted a strike in 1941 among the laborers, the cotton choppers, asking for a wage of 30¢ an hour. As I remember it, at this time their wages had been raised to 10¢ an hour, and we demanded 30¢ an hour. They won this strike and got the 30¢ an hour.

Q: How do you account for the fact that they won the strike? How long was it? How bitter was it? How much willingness was there on the part of the planters by this time to accommodate themselves more easily to demands?

McKinney: Well, here again it is necessary to emphasize the general influence of the New Deal in all areas of American life, because here too it was influential. The planters were beginning to understand that they could not carry on as they had carried on before, that this was a period when wages had to be paid, when wages had to be raised, when working conditions had to be improved, and when human rights had to be observed, as had not been done before in this region and in other regions of the United States. And so this was a help to us in our organizing and in our efforts to promote the welfare of these workers and to conduct the strike to a successful conclusion.

Q: You mention this was in 1941. Do you recall about which month in 1941?

McKinney: I knew it was in the spring. Some time in the spring, because that was the time when most of the cotton chopping was done. The weeds grew up in the spring and the summer. So I know the activity took place in the spring.

Q: Do you recall if by this time the defense contracts were calling for a good deal more cotton, so that there would be a great deal more demand for cotton at this time, and this might have been a factor in the planters being more willing to give the raise?

McKinney: I don't remember. This isn't clear to me, but I wouldn't doubt but what this did have some effect on the planters. But I think the main force was the general activity of the New Deal, and the activity of these workers themselves, both of which, together, impressed the planters that they could not carry on as they'd been carrying on before. The planters were under the same pressure as the industrial leaders were: they were all under the pressure to improve working conditions and raise wages, and keep hands off in the matter of organization.

In 1942, we could have open meetings in Southeast Missouri, something which we could not do in 1940.

Q: Were you among the first organizers to go into that area, or did you have predecessors? I'm wondering, why did it take so long before this consciousness to organize on the part of the workers, and the consciousness on the part of the planters that they had to accommodate, did not develop here for so long an interval after the beginning of the New Deal?

McKinney: It began to develop, I suspect, after the activities of the Agricultural Department began in this area, as well as in other areas.

I may have mentioned before --(if I did not, it is necessary to mention it now)-- the La Forge project. The La Forge

project, at La Forge, Missouri, in this area, was a project of the New Deal whose object was to make the people who lived in this project self-supporting and independent. Each family was given from 90 to 100 acres. The farm was stocked -- chickens, hogs, cow, a mule, a plow, seeds -- and the women were shown how to can fruit and vegetables, how to care for children. Homes were built. Mattresses were made in a mattress factory someplace, one of the New Deal projects. And this itself made these people begin to think differently and lift up their heads.

There was only one of these projects. The planters began to complain. Their representatives in Congress began to complain. And there were no more of these projects, at least in Southeast Missouri. The next project was one where each family had a piece of land about 100 by 50 and a house.

Q: I'd like to go back for a moment to the question of controlling informers, as you began setting up some of these meetings. Just how did you tighten your procedure so that you could either spot informers or keep potential informers out?

McKinney: This, there, as always, was and is a problem of experience and caution, and cannot be dealt with any other way. We simply had to be careful what people we picked out to talk to.

Then we had to be careful to explain to them why they shouldn't talk to anybody else, why they shouldn't say anything about meetings which were held. Then it was necessary, of course, to observe very carefully the conduct of the people who attended these small meetings which we held. I can only emphasize again, it s a matter of experience and a matter of caution. I pointed out that we had to do the same thing at the beginning of the organization of the CIO, in communities where company spies and steel pigeons were running all over the place.

Q: When did you leave Southeast Missouri, and what was the situation at that time?

McKinney: Due to various circumstances that happened in the case of political parties, particularly small left wing parties, our activity in Southeast Missouri did not continue, even for as long as my membership in the organization continued. Conditions improved, and we would say when we left that we had accomplished something, because the situation there was entirely different from the situation when we began in 1940.

Q: Then where did you go?

McKinney: Well, this was just a matter of getting some other

party activity, to take up most of the time. A large part of the time that this Southeast Missouri activity was going on, I was in Buffalo, New York. I went to Buffalo in December. Correction: I went to Buffalo the day after Christmas, 1941. I remained in Buffalo from this date until July of 1942.

One of the problems which I was beginning to deal with at this time, as the war progressed, was the problem of the upgrading of Negroes in industry. This was a problem which Negroes were facing all over the United States. I conceived the notion to try out an experiment in Buffalo, with a group which we began to call Workingmen's Welfare Committees. I worked this scheme out on the train between New York and Buffalo. One thing was primary, and important: any activity for the upgrading of Negroes in industry must be carried on inside the organized labor movement, which meant in effect inside the CIO, and must be carried on, so far as the employer was concerned, by the union itself, not by the Negroes as individuals.

The aim of assembling the Negroes as a small group was to indoctrinate them with this notion, to make them union-conscious, to make them understand that they must carry on through the union as loyal union members and as supporters of the union, to the end that the union itself would take up this fight for the upgrading of Negroes and for Negro equality, not only in the plant where they worked, in the industry where they worked, but also in the union of which they were members and where at times they

did not have equality.

The first thing I did, after I got to Buffalo, was to discuss this plan with the members of the branch of the Workers Party there. I might say here that my official position in Buffalo was organizer of the party branch. I began talking cautiously to individual Negroes that I met, and this resulted in assembling nine Negro union members who were willing to sit down weekly and discuss this problem and begin to carry on activities.

At this time, there were no Negroes working on production in any industry in Buffalo except the steel industry, and here they were working large in the foundry and in other places at Lackawanna Steel Company, where the jobs were the hardest and the conditions the unpleasantest.

One part of the scheme was that this committee should not have any organized form. There were no officers. There were no records. We met on Sunday morning at 11 o'clock at the members' homes for about two hours. I had seen to it that I got the nine people from nine different plants and, as much as possible, from different industries. We had the steel industry, the automobile industry, and various other industries in Buffalo, represented in the committee. We were concerned primarily with the automobile plants and the steel plants. There were General Motors and Ford plants in the city, and the Lackawanna Steel Company, which I think

by this time was owned by the Bethlehem Steel Company.

One of the problems faced when I got to Buffalo was to activate Negroes in the steel union, the United Steel Workers, at Lackawanna. There had been a strike there, some months before I arrived, and the Negroes had virtually organized this strike and had been the most active participants in this strike. However, afterthe strike was over and the Little Steel Formula had been adopted, white men assumed sole leadership in the union. There were five locals in this area, five steel locals. White men had assumed the leadership, and the Negroes who had been the most dominant people in the strike took a back seat. They took a back seat not only figuratively, but took a back seat in the union meetings: that is, when they came into the union meetings, they went to the rear of the hall and sat down and kept quiet all through the union meetings.

Consequently, when the time came to discuss upgrading, the Negroes were in an unpopular position. There were men who had put in a great deal of time working to organize the unions and get the locals functioning, without help from the Negroes, although shortsighted, did not feel that the Negroes had been active enough in the union to deserve consideration from the union in the matter of upgrading.

We ran into all sorts of miseducation, no education,

prejudices, and misunderstandings of this kind on the part of these white workers and these black workers. And we had to get to work to re-orient them and try to unify them as we thought they should be, as workers and as members of industrial unions.

There were several humorous incidents in connection with this activity. The superintendent of one of the mills decided to upgrade two Negroes. The white workers in the area in which these Negroes were to work went to the superintendent and complained that they didn't want to work with these Negroes because they didn't smell good. The superintendent remarked, "What are you talking about? I went down there the other day where these men were. I stood close to them. And I didn't get any different odor from them than I do from you, standing by you now."

The men were upgraded and got the job.

We carried on activities under the direction of this committee, which was really under my personal direction, and it is necessary for me to emphasize that nobody in Buffalo knew that I was carrying on this activity, outside of the members of the party branch. It was not generally known in Buffalo even that the committee existed. The committee made no public statements, and the committee only functioned inside the plant and inside the union. It had no public position, no public statements, and was unknown to the public.

Another incident is of some significance. I also worked with . . .

There was an anti-discrimination organization functioning in Buffalo at this time which I suppose had connection with similar organizations in the other part of New York state. I knew a man in this organization in Buffalo, and one day he said to me, "I should like to show you something."

He showed me a letter from one of the big employers, saying this: "I cannot understand what has happened to our Negro employees. Formerly they were a happy and satisfied lot. Now there is a great deal of discontent among them. Perhaps you could help us to discover what their problems are."

Of course, I knew what the difficulty was. The Buffalo Workingmens Welfare Committee had been active in this plant, and had been stirring up Negroes to demand promotion and upgrading. It is necessary to point out that this was not always an easy task. Not from the standpoint of the employer am I speaking now, nor from the standpoint of the white worker. That was difficult. But we also found difficulties with the Negroes themselves, and it has to be emphasized that this is one of the prices that we had to pay for long years and decades of Jim Crow. Negroes had been conditioned not to fight for upgrading, not to fight for promotion, not to fight to be put on production, for various

quit trying to get them to go back to work, they would give him a good whipping. The president of the local, a Negro, reported this to the superintendent of the plant, and he decided to go down and see the men. The superintendent asked these men what they had told Tim. They told him that they had told Tim that if he didn't get out of there he'd get a whipping and they said, "Mr. ____, and so, this goes for you too."

I simply cite these as concrete illustrations of arousing people to struggle and fight for themselves, people who have been sitting down letting themselves be run over. In one of the General Motors Chevrolet plants, Negroes were upgraded. One Negro was made chairman of the shop bargaining committee, and another one was made a delegate to General Motors wage negotiations.

I started to say something a while back about the difficulties of getting the Negroes to function, and mentioned that this was the price and the reward of Jim Crow. I found Negroes who did not want to be on production. They did not want to run machines, because it was easier to push a truck, and when you got through pushing a truck you put it over in a corner and you didn't have to watch it. If you were sweeping the floor, you got through sweeping the floor and you put the broom up, and you didn't have to watch it. A machine had to be watched. It meant that one had to be on the alert.

All of these problems, in my opinion, were the result, as I said before, of decades of Jim Crow, decades of oppression; they were a price that had to be paid, and the problems had to be defeated. This was one of the functions of the Workingmens Welfare Committee.

I want to emphasize again that this name had no meaning, but we had to have some kind of label. I also want to mention that these committees were formed in other cities, and carried on the same kind of activity in other cities.

It has to be emphasized and it is necessary to emphasize, in the light of what I shall talk about next, that we insisted and taught and instructed and agitated, among Negroes, for carrying on all activities inside of the union as loyal members of the union, with no compromise in the matterof their support of the union.

On incident that should be mentioned which shows how, with education and courage and legalty to the labor movement, conditions can be improved. In one of the locals of the automobile industry, the white president returned from Detroit some weeks after our committee had been in operation, called a special meeting of the local, and said, "I've just come back from Detroit, and I have seen our Negro brothers over there carrying on activities and filling posts which they do not have in

any of our locals in Buffalo. I think we have to correct this. And I want to say to our Negro brothers that we want them to be more active in the local. We want all of them to become active members of the local, and we want them to act just like everybody else in the local. And if they want to-- and we urge them s-to run for office in the local."

This wasa new situation, and one which was a lesson to the Negro members of the local and also a lesson to the Negro members of our Buffalo Workingmens Welfare Committee.

Q: Mr. McKinney, you mentioned another incident or anecdote about the Negro unionist, that he didn't immediately consider himself part of the union. What was that story?

McKinney: Yes, one of the Negro men in Buffalo with whom I had been struggling for several weeks, to try to make him understand that before the employer he and the white worker were the same, that this was true even though the white worker did not understand it or the Negro worker did not understand it, or neither of them understood it.

A Negro worker burst into my room one afternoon and explained to me that there had been some encroachment of the management on their rights, that the Union leadership was upset, that they were thinking about going on strike, and that they had

come to the Negro workers to participate in the strike. He said, "Now they in trouble and they come to us for help."

I waited a minute and then said to him, "Who's in trouble?"

He hesitated, and said: "They are."

I said, "What 'they'?"

Then he seemed to catch on and said, "The union."

I asked him, "What union? Whose union?"

All the weeks that I had spent with him seemed to come back to him then, and he said to me, "Well, I get your point. It's my union."

This was the sort of educational activity that it was necessary to carry on continually. What I want to emphasize is, by telling these incidents, is to emphasize and illustrate that all the trade unionists had to be, or will have to be, educated -- the white ones and the black ones -- to understand what their position is in society, as workers and wage earners.

Q: You feel that the white union leaders used this Negro attitude to create division, to keep the Negroes from aspiring to higher posts within the union, and to exploit it in this fashion?

McKinney: The white union leaders who did this, and who do this now, are exhibiting a type of miseducation, or education which they learned from their employers. The white workers did not create

this set of beliefs themselves. These beliefs were created by the employers.

This procedure is not so crude today as it was in past decades, because more and more employers now are dedicated to the principle of trade unionism. But in past decades, when many of the older trade unionists were coming along, this was a very conscious procedure on the part of the employers. I remember as late as 35 years ago, the coal operators in Western Pennsylvania would go to the foreign Slavic worker and tell him not to enter into any kind of union or any kind of agreements with the native American white workers, that they were troublemakers and were all against them. Then they would go to the native American white workers and say, "Keep away from these Hunkies, they'll get you in trouble."

They would go to the Slavic worker and to the native white worker and say, "Don't have anything to do with the niggers. They're no good."

I know of instances of this kind that went on, and many of the older workers were educated by this sort of procedure. And this has not gone out of style yet, particularly in the South. But we demonstrated, and it has been demonstrated, it seems to me, over and over, in the past 20 years, that workers can be re-educated or educated and trained away from these procedures and these beliefs.

IV

Q: When you mentioned the stress on Negroes being taught that they were members of the union, are you thinking of the problem of dual unionism here? Are you thinking of something, for example, that's been used to described the newly-founded Negro American Labor Council?

McKinney: Yes. Technically, the basic problem is dual unionism, but that is not the immediate problem that I am largely concerned with. The immediate problem that I'm largely concerned with, in connection with the Randolph movement, is the perpetuation of Jim Crow. Because it is inevitable that a movement such as the one that Randolph has formed, functioning as a definite, formal, conventional organization, with officers and procedures, is bound to attract to itself not only Negroes who are lukewarm in connection with union membership and union loyalty, but also Negroes who are opposed to unions, from chauvinistic positions, and also Negroes who are opportunists and merely want to be in on some bandwagong or want to be in some movement as a little leader of some sort.

I think the Randolph movement is a complete mistake, and very unfortunate. I think Randolph should have proceeded to accomplish his purposes, which are legitimate and just, precisely in the manner that we did in the case of the Workingmens Welfare Committees, particularly the Buffalo Workingmens Welfare Committee.

The Randolph movement is implicitly an anti-union movement, and if it lasts and persists in the way it has begun, it can only become openly an anti-union movement. This leads me to say something about the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, in this matter of the trade unions and the Negro. I'm speaking specifically of the labor secretary of the NAACP, Herbert Hill. Mr. Hill has taken a position, public, and in writing, from time to time, that actually means that the unions are of no service to Negroes, that they are anti-Negro, and that there's no reason for Negroes to support them. I believe that particularly at this late date, after Negroes have had two or more decades of experience in the CIO, that this matter can be and should be handled by the Negro leadership inside the CIO without any assistance from outside organizations, particularly when those organizations have an employee who functions in the manner of the labor secretary of the NAACP.

Q: I understand that the concept of the Negro American Labor Council is to create an organization which in turn will create power leverage upon the unions and force the unions to end Jim Crow practices. Now, this, of course, is in contradistinction to the concept you had with the Workingmens Welfare Committee, where you did not have this type of leverage. How would you characterize

your approach, as far as bringing pressure?

McKinney: I should say that my approach was to look upon the Negro worker and the white worker, no matter what their prejudices, no matter what their grievances, no matter what they thought of each other -- to look upon them as essentially alike, in their economic position; as considered alike by their employer; and therefore, they had to be educated to understand this, and they had to function together inside the union against the employer. The Negroes had to function together inside the union to educate the white union membership to understand that there must be unity and no division among the workers.

This is not the procedure of the Randolph Committee, and cannot be the procedure of the Randolph Committee, because it has the paradoxical position of being inside the union and outside the union at the same time -- not only being outside the union, but being allied with organizations outside the union, and with organizations that only recently have paid any attention whatsoever to the existence of unions, except to say derogatory things concerning them.

Q: To go back to the positions of Negroes within the Buffalo unions where you were working, how do you account more specifically for the fact that after Negroes had been active in agitation

they still ended up, figuratively and literally, in the back seats of the union, with the white leaders assuming dominance?

McKinney: Well, this is another one of those things that happen in a country where Jim Crow has been around. Negroes had never learned and had never been taught that it was necessary to have a responsible, active, functioning union leadership. They had never learned and had never been taught that you do not have a permanent picket line. You do not have a permanent strike. You have a strike, for certain demands. You put out a picket line as a means of enforcing those demands. Then you negotiate with the employer. The thing is settled, and you call the strike off. Then you go through a formal procedure of consolidating these gains by a formal organization of the union, so that you are prepared to negotiate with the employer for the benefit of the union membership and as a follow-up, for instance, on the strike which has taken place.

This is a part of the problem of trade union education which Negroes had never learned, because they'd never been, in large numbers, active in trade unions. Consequently they walked in and decided, let somebody else be president, let somebody else be vice-president, let somebody else be head of the bargaining committee-- which meant, in effect, let somebody else do the work now.

Q: In other words, they were responsive on an episodic basis, but not so responsive on a continuous work basis?

McKinney: Well, the problem here is of course a division of function. There are thousands and thousands of workers who will flock to the picket lines and man the picket lines, but who do not care to be bothered with the routine of operating the union. This is true even among white workers. There are white workers who will man the picket lines, but who will refuse to go to the union meetings. The activity and the novelty and the glare and the glamor of the picket line attracts them, whereas the routine of the management and leadership of a local is boring to them.

The difficulty with the Negroes, however, was not that they were bored with trade union leadership. They were not bored because they'd never functioned in this manner. They simply did not understand that this had to be done, this was a necessary function, and that they had responsibility along with the white workers for performing this function.

Q: How would you evaluate the progress that you made while you were in Buffalo? How much do you think you achieved in the problem of educating Negro unionists to the demands of management and organization?

McKinney: We made progress. The reason why I know we made progress is because there were certain concrete things happened, some of which I have mentioned. There were others. There were workers who themselves became educators of other workers, and I know even today, when I visit friends in various cities, I see some of the people that we had contact with in those days, and they are carrying on their activities in the manner that they were taught by us. And I can say that we did have some small measure of success, and that our activities had a positive result.

One of the problems that we faced in Buffalo which I haven't mentioned yet, and which wasn't confined to Buffalo -- and this was also one of the prices we had to pay for decades of Jim Crow and oppression and discrimination -- There was a Negro dentist in Buffalo who apparently was not fully occupied at his dental profession, and he accepted the task, from a company which made parachutes for the Air Force, of selecting some Negro girls to work for the company. This man who ran the parachute company had a very clever scheme for evading the payment of overtime wages. It isn't necessary to go into details of this scheme, but he had a scheme by which he evaded the payment of overtime wages. Furthermore, he kept the Negro girls working on one shift and separated entirely from the white girls.

This discrimination existed alongside a type of discrimination

practiced by the Negro dentist in the employment of the Negro girls. He only OK'd mulatto Negro girls for working in the plant. So here were the Negro girls in Buffalo, who went up to Dr. X. to apply for the job, were screened out on the basis of color, and only the mulatto girls could get by and get sent up. These mulatto girls, after they got up to the plant, were separated from the white girls and put in a shift by themselves.

We got busy on this, when we heard what the dentist was doing and what the plant was doing, and we appointed a committee to call on Dr. X. Dr. X was told in very straightforward and very forceful language that if he didn't stop completely, get out of the business of running an unlicensed employment bureau, stick to his dental work, that we would chase him out of town. The men we sent to talk to him were so impressive physically that we didn't have ~~much~~ only difficulty with Dr. X after that ~~sending men up.~~

Then we took up the matter with the owners of the plant. We also made contact with a young Negro woman who worked in there and began to work through her and educate her as an agitator in the plant. The woman was a UAW, United Automobile Workers Union, and they too had become interested in this plant and in this doctor. And we were assisted in suppressing him by the activities of the general union movement in Buffalo.

One day the girl, the Negro girl that was our spearhead in the plant, came to me and told me that just as she was leaving

work, one of the white girls had walked up to her and asked her where she was going. She'd said, "I'm going home."

The white girl had replied, "Oh no, I'll be damned if you are. You're going out to take a drink with us."

This was the first break that we got in this plant, to eliminate the Jim Crow separatist situation which existed there. Resulting from this was the unification of the workers in this plant.

Q: You mentioned, concerning this screening, the fact that only mulatto girls were accepted. In the Negro union community generally in Buffalo, or even elsewhere, did you find this internal type of racial discrimination too, based solely on the "visibility" of color of skin?

McKinney: That is a good question to ask and to be answered, because I neglected to say that Dr. X proceeded in this manner primarily because that was the way he had proceeded in the Negro community. For instance, he would do the same thing if he was getting ready to hire a Negro girl to work in his office: he would only hire a mulatto girl. Furthermore than this, this was not confined to Dr. X. This was the common practice at one time among certain types of Negroes, Negro doctors and lawyers and other Negroes, to hire mulatto girls and exclude black girls from

employment in their offices.

This, too, is a part of the price we pay for Jim Crow, separation, discrimination, because these Negroes were brought up and conditioned to believe that there was something inherently virtuous and something inherently worthwhile about being white, and something inherently wrong about being black. Therefore they were taught, conditioned, to look upon "white" as being desirable and "black" as being undesirable. And these things were practiced, just as we saw it practiced by Dr. X., the Negro dentist in Buffalo.

Q: What about among the men themselves? Was there any sort of discrimination by one man against another man because one was a mulatto, one was not a mulatto or was blacker in appearance?

McKinney: No. We had none of that. Atleast, that was rare; we had some of that, but not among the men. That was a more or less individual phenomenon, but we had no difficulties with that at all.

Q: Were there any problems of a geographic birth origins of the Negroes -- for example, if they were West Indians, did they have certain problems that native born American Negroes did not have? Or was there at least a tension between the two groups and any other analogous groups?

McKinney: This is a somewhat delicate question to answer and discuss, because it is a fact that therewas, and is still, some tension which exists between native Negroes and Negroes from the West Indies. We did not have that problem in connection with our activities, because in the inner circle we did not have any West Indians. There are Negroes who would take the position that there should not be any. As I said before, this is somewhat of a delicate question to discuss, but it has been found from time to time to be a real one, and to have resulted in some unpleasant circumstances and unpleasant situations.

Q: But as a whole, at least in your union work, this has not been much of a problem -- is that right?

McKinney: No. No, it hasn't.

Q: In Buffalo, about what percentage of the union membership was Negro, as you recall it?

McKinney: In the steel plant, I don't know what percentage, but there was a large, large number of Negroes. In some departments, like the hard work departments and the dirty departments, the majority were Negroes; in some sections, all Negroes. In the

rolling mill and in other departments of the plant where the work was not so hard, or where the pay was higher, there'd be very few Negroes. Most of them would be white.

What the situation is today, I can't say, because I have no contact now with the industry. In the automobile plants, the percentage of Negroes was very small, although sometimes it would look to us as though there were lots of Negroes working there because we had come up under conditions where there were no Negroes working. And when we saw 50 or 75 or 100 Negroes coming out of the plant gate, that seemed like a large number of Negroes to us.

Q: Mr. McKinney, you mentioned you wanted to add something to your thoughts on A. Philip Randolph's Negro American Labor Council movement?

McKinney: Yes. I want to emphasize that one of the reasons why extreme care is necessary, at any time, in forming a separate Negro organization is that one emphasizes, in an extraordinary way, the fact of being a Negro. This is particularly bad in connection with Negro workers, because it leaves out of consideration completely that the Negroes in question, or the Negro in question, are workers and wage earners.

Secondly, a very grave danger of the Randolph movement today is that it will attract to itself Negroes who refuse to recognize that any progress has been made in the elimination of Jim Crow, or who do not consider certain improvements as genuinely improvements, because these black chauvinists will not consider anything an improvement in which Negroes are allied and functioning in the same organization with white people, just as people, and not as Negroes.

E.A. McKinney - 20 May 1961 - by Ed Edwin.

Q: Mr. McKinney, during this period when you were organizing the unemployed in various areas of the country, what was your political status? To which political party did you belong, and what was the relationship of that political party to other political parties that may have been active in the welfare and unemployment problem field?

Mr. McKinney: I was a member and functionary of the Workers Party of the United States. This was the group which was known as the Trotskyist group. Some of the leaders of this group had left the Communist Party or had been expelled from the Communist Party following the expulsion of Trotsky. All the activity which I have mentioned before was carried on by me as a member of the Workers Party and under the direction of the Workers Party. I emphasize this because it should be a part of the historical record and an illustration of the functioning of political parties. Competing with the Workers Party in the same type of activity was the Communist Party and the Socialist Party. The Communist Party, for instance, had led in the organization of the unemployed into the Unemployed Councils. The Socialist Party had organized the Workers Alliance. The organization of work among Negroes was carried on primarily by the Communist Party and

by the Workers' Party. Not so much of this activity was carried on by the Socialist Party.

Not only did we carry on this type of activity, but in our trade union work we functioned through the organization of what we called progressive groups in the unions. Our emphasis at all times was upon demanding democratic procedure in the unions, free speech within the unions, the control of the financial operations and the economic activities of the unions by the union membership.

The question might be asked by interested persons why there were three unemployed organizations, one each sponsored by the three parties that I have mentioned. The basic reason for this, of course, was that the three parties were based upon three different political theories and three different types of political activity. The Workers' Part always took the position that whereas we were internationalists and believed in the international organization of the working class, the individual parties, the Workers' Party in the United States for instance had to be an American party and concerned with American history, American questions, and the problems confronting the American working class specifically. We did not believe that the American Party should change its activity or its political line, as was the case of the Communist Party, merely to suit the needs and necessities of what we called the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Kremlin of Moscow

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Our differences with the Socialist Party were concerned not only with concrete and fundamental political disagreement, but with the tendency, it seemed to us, for the Socialist Party to be what I might call an inactivist party, whereas ours and the Communist Party were real activist parties.

Secondly, another reason for the existence of the three organizations was the fact that three parties, three separate parties, existed, and it is a fact that it is a tendency for organizations, if they exist, to organize peripheral bodies or bodies of workers that revolve around or under the guidance of theparticular political parties. This at times can lead to unfortunate circumstances, unfortunate events, and at times indicates that there should be a getting together or a merger of the organizations, or a merger of the political parties sponsoring them.

Q: Mr. McKinney, could you tell a little bit more about how the different parties acted in comparison with one another in this organization, working within their theoretical basis?

McKinney: Yes. We of the Workers' Party were quite often puzzled and uncertain what relationship we should have to the Communist Party at certain times, and also what relationship we

should have to the Socialist Party and what relationship we should have to both of these rival political organizations together.

To illustrate this, I can mention the development of the unemployed organization in Pennsylvania, for example. When the Workers' Party -- or the American Workers' Party, it was at that time, before the American Workers' Party had merged with the Trotskyist Communist League of America -- we were forming a state organization. All three organizations were busy to gain control of this state organization, of the unemployed workers, as it was formed. The Socialist Party was organizing locals, the Communist Party was organizing locals, and the American Workers' party was organizing locals. The project was, in fact, under the actual guidance of the American Workers' Party. In organizing the unemployed, however, on a state-wide basis it was not correct or possible to exclude locals and organizations that were attached to, or under the leadership of, the SP or the CP. The day of the convention, both the CP locals and the SP locals were present, along with those of the American Workers' Party. The CP locals -- or better, the national secretary of the Unemployed Councils was notified at midnight of the day before the convention opened that the CP locals should send their representatives and be present the next morning. We did this because we were afraid that the convention would be overwhelmed by the SP membership -- the SP delegations (Socialist) -- and this would render the

organization impotent, because of the lack of militancy and lack of aggressiveness and lack of fighting spirit that was necessary. We would not have this problem in connection with the CP (Communist). The problem we would have with them would not be to call a halt or attempt to halt their militancy, but to be sure that their militancy took the right turn and was expressed in the proper channels at the proper time and in the proper way.

Q: Mr. McKinney, how was this convention organized? How were the delegates chosen? What were the problems of rivalry among the various partisans at the convention?

McKinney: The American Workers' Party had taken the initiative in attempting to set up a state organization of the unemployed, and the convention was to be held in the agricultural building in the state capital at Harrisburg. Theoretically, of course, the correct procedure would have been for all political organizations interested in the organization of the unemployed to have come together, holding a convention as a joint, united effort. There were very practical problems, however, that had to be paid attention to. One was what we considered the lack of militancy, the lack of aggressiveness, on the part of the SP, and the undue and at some times misdirected aggressiveness on the part of

the C.P. Furthermore, we knew that the Communist Party did not function as an autonomous party in the United States, but was under the direction of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and we could never be sure when their political line would change and therefore their activity inside the unemployed organization would change, and would make trouble and cause disruption within the organization, at the expense of the unemployed workers.

However, in practice when we evaluated the situation for this particular convention -- and it must be remembered that we were setting up a new organization where one did not exist before, that is a new state organization of the unemployed -- it was necessary that the idea of militancy and the fighting spirit should prevail, and that it should become a bedrock for the functioning of the organization. We could not depend upon the Socialist Party to supply this kind of leadership. This meant that if the Socialist Party had a majority of the delegates in the convention, they would determine the course of the organization on the basis of their majority.

We decided, therefore, that we would invite the Communist Party to send the Unemployed Councils to the convention, or to have their organization elect delegates to the convention. This union of the American Workers' Party and the Communist Party, this united front between the two in the convention, would

assure that the organization would be a militant one. The headaches which we knew we would have with the Communist Party's adventurism and with its other disabilities that I've mentioned before, we concluded we could take care of later after the organization was formed. And I can say here that this turned out to be correct, and there was no problem with the Unemployed Councils after the state organization was formed.

Q: What actually happened during the course of the convention? What were the proceedings like, and what was the flavor of the atmosphere?

McKinney: Well, one thing I should have mentioned that I left out was the fact that we only notified the national secretary of the Unemployed Councils at midnight the day before the convention opened, that they were to send their delegates to the convention. Nevertheless there were around 200 delegates from their councils in the convention at 10 o'clock the next morning when the convention opened. This testified to the high degree of organization of the Communist Party, its organization of zeal and drive, and its ability to function and be active.

The convention proceeded peacefully. There were no upheavals. It was under the leadership and direction largely of the American Workers' Party. This was what we had hoped for, and

this was really the result. We established a statewide, militant organization that carried out the spirit of the membership of the organization, which had always said that this was a fighting organization and not a begging organization. And this was the kind of state organization which we established.

Q: You mentioned that the Communist effort to control the resulting organization was a matter that could be and finally was taken care of satisfactorily. How did this work?

McKinney: Well, this worked in the same way that all of our activities in connection with the CP worked. One had to remain alert, keep one's eyes open, and be ready at all times to engage in a showdown struggle with the leadership of the CP, who were very crafty individuals, very devoted to their own organization, and not always concerned about speaking the truth or adhering to the facts of the case as they stood clearly before them. We had united front activities with them which were written up by their people and sent to the Daily Worker, and the unemployed organization would not be mentioned at all. They would mention a hunger march which was organized by the Unemployed League and the Unemployed Councils together, and the report in the Daily Worker would read as though no organization was present

except the Unemployed Council. So this was the sort of thing we were continually facing, which, of course, made it necessary, as I said before, to be very much on the alert in our activities in connection with the Communist Party. I might add, however, that one had to be on the alert in connection with one's activities with the Socialist Party also, but it was a different kind of alertness that one maintained toward the Socialist Party, different from the alertness that one had to maintain toward the Communist Party. With the Communist Party, one had to be careful lest they function very actively but incorrectly. With the Socialist Party, we were always alert lest they function incorrectly but inactively.

Q: In other words, the Socialist Party followed a [illegible] line, both in action and in theory, during this period -- is that right?

McKinney: Yes, that's true. Another concrete illustration I can give of this -- in the unmployed League in Pittsburgh, at one time, the Socialist Party got the majority and assumed leadership of the League. Soon after they assumed leadership of the League in Allegheny County, we found it very much more difficult to carry on activities in a militant and aggressive manner. They were for more peaceful procedures, for instance, the

Local 2 in East Liberty, which was under the leadership of the Workers' Party members, one afternoon went to the storehouse where surplus flour was stored, opened the storehouse, took out 75 sacks of the flour, and distributed them among the membership that needed flour. The chairman of the organization, a member of the Socialist Party, telephoned to the relief station in East Liberty, promising them that he would come out, get the flour back, and return it to the relief organization and to their storehouse. This was impossible for him to do, of course, and we they knew that he didn't dare come to East Liberty and attempt any such feat, but the point to be emphasized is that this was his attitude in relationship to the relief organization.

Q: Mr. McKinney, how long did you stay active in this work of organizing the unemployed and working within a party, and then where did you go?

McKinney: The most active period of my life, in connection with political and trade union activity, took place beginning about 1925, and lasting until after the close of the Second World War. After the Second World War, the leadership of the Workers' Party began what seemed to me a series of improper actions, in a course of action which in my opinion was contrary to the principles which had guided us through the years.

The high point, or the low point of this activity, was a proposal to change the name of the organization from Workers' Party to Independent Socialist League. I was against wanting to keep the name Workers' Party, and to proceed with the activities which had brought us a small measure of success, a small measure of influence, and a small increase in our membership.

Next, after the change in the name of the organization from Workers' Party to Independent Socialist League, was a rather definite and concrete transformation of the party activities -- a change in orientation -- from the wage earners to students on college campuses. The upshot of this, for me, was my decision to leave the organization, whereupon I submitted my resignation. Later, a few years after I resigned, the organization -- that is, the Independent Socialist League -- entered the Socialist Party, where its members are functioning today.

Q: What was the year that you left it?

McKinney: I think it was 1951. It was around that date. I can't remember the exact year now.

Q: You submitted your resignation in writing, with a letter of reasons for the action?

McKinney: My resignation was a rather lengthy document. It ran to

something like 50 pages, in which I discussed the complete notion of the manner in which political organization should function -- that is, the manner in which a revolutionary Socialist or Marxist organization should function -- and pointed out where the Workers' Party (or the Independent Socialist League) had deviated from this course.

One of the things that I had to pay especial attention to was the editorial management of the party paper, Labor Action. This had become quite sectarian, and seemed to me to depart completely from any sort of reality. There were instances where I felt the paper was carrying articles that were implicitly and objectively anti-labor, and at times objectively anti-Negro. I have to emphasize here that this was not the subjective intention of the editor. This was largely due to the sectarian attitude which the editor had toward political questions and toward questions of the struggle of Negroes and the struggle of the workers in their unions.

Q: Could you summarize a little further what you expressed or recommended in your letter of resignation?

McKinney: First, I took the position, which to me seemed to be the correct position for a Marxist to take, that the orientation

of the party should be toward the working class, toward the wage earners, not toward students. This had for a long time been [illegible] United States: what role, if any, will students play in a Socialist movement? I had from time to time said somewhat facetiously that the students would not become a political leadership in the United States. They might in Bulgaria, or some country where the masses were illiterate and did not know how to read and write, but in this country where the working class was literate the students would not become a political leadership nor the political instructors of the working class.

I also took the position that the party should carry on just as it had done before the war and during the war, and attempt to build itself gradually, slowly, into a sound Marxian Socialist Party. I was not concerned with whether or not the party would grow fast and be a big party quickly. I knew that would not happen. Perhaps it might not ever have become a big party. But my contention was that it could become a sound, militant Marxian party, with a proper program, and could develop influence. It is a fact that the small group which was the Workers' Party did develop very great influence in the country for its size, and was a real potent factor in the leadership of workers and in supplying leadership in mass organizations, such as the Unemployed League and the trade unions.

Q: What were your major concerns in the post- World War II readjustment period, until your resignation in the early 1950's?

McKinney: During the war, I had become, in addition to my post as national labor secretary of the party, I had become national secretary of the party. I also was chairman of a committee which dealt with the problems of Negro workers, or at least the problems of Negroes in the United States. I carried on this activity until it became clear to me that I could no longer function as a leader of the organization, as for reasons I have mentioned before. I was also a member of the party's national committee and a member of its smaller political committee.

At the convention of 1951, I think it was, I requested and insisted that my name not appear on the slate for membership on the national committee. This meant that I would no longer be a member of the political committee, and I had already told the committee, my associates, that I would not be national secretary any longer nor hold any other post in the organization.

This left me with one or two years of membership as a private soldier, so to speak, in the organization, without portfolio and inactive, before my resignation was submitted.

Q: Mr. McKinney, could you give a sort of summary evaluation as to what all this work that you did during these decades has meant

to the American employment situation?

McKinney: Despite the low [illegible] so-called left wing political movement, and the distressful situation in the trade union movement, as they face what is called automation and various other obstacles, I do not share the opinions expressed by some people that the activities and the opinions which were at the heart of the development of the labor movement and of the revolutionary political movement are but of date. I think the activities with which I was associated and the opinions and the theoretical structure which ran through those activities are? is correct today, and will remain correct, so long as capitalism lasts.

I do not feel that it is necessary to make any apologies for my activities. If, in my opinion, the proper opportunity presented itself again, I should enlist in these activities and pursue the same kind of course again that I pursued for several decades. I think the course of history will bear me out and that in the future people who now talk about "the end of ideology", socialism is out of style, the workers are becoming capitalists, the working class is becoming smaller and smaller -- that is, there are more white collar workers than there are blue collar workers: in my opinion, a lot of this talk is pure nonsense.

is irrelevant, and has really nothing to do with the actual concrete situation in the world.

Q: At the present time, there is a chronic unemployment rate running somewhere around 6 to 7 percent, in certain areas much higher, and there's also a hard core unemployed group which includes a great many Negroes because they're unskilled, they haven't had the apprenticeship and upgrading job training activities. Are there any lessons, do you feel, to be drawn from your organizing work that would be applicable in today's situation?

McKinney: Yes. I believe that the theoretical principles, the basic theoretical principles, upon which we operated when we were organizing the unemployed, when we were organizing the Workingmens' Welfare Committees, when we were functioning in progressive groups in trade unions, are valid today just as they were 20 and 25 years ago. The tactical approach has to be different, and this must be understood. One would certainly not start out today to approach the problem of unemployment in the same tactical way that we did in 1930, '31, '32. But the basic problem is the same, and the theoretical analysis of the situation has not basically changed. The problem of unemployment today is the problem of the sickness of capitalist society. The problem of unemployment in 1930 was a problem of the sickness

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